

Criollo, Mestizo, Mulato, LatiNegro, Indígena, White, or Black? The US Hispanic/Latino Population and Multiple Responses in the 2000 Census

Hortensia Amaro, PhD, and Ruth E. Zambrana, PhD

ABSTRACT

Current dialogues on changes in collecting race and ethnicity data have not considered the complexity of tabulating multiple race responses among Hispanics. Racial and ethnic identification—and its public reporting—among Hispanics/Latinos in the United States is embedded in dynamic social factors. Ignoring these factors leads to significant problems in interpreting data and understanding the relationship of race, ethnicity, and health among Hispanics/Latinos. In the flurry of activity to resolve challenges posed by multiple race responses, we must remember the larger issue that looms in the foreground—the lack of adequate estimates of mortality and health conditions affecting Hispanics/Latinos. The implications are deemed important because Hispanics/Latinos will become the largest minority group in the United States within the next decade. (*Am J Public Health*. 2000;90:1724–1727)

The major objective of the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) review of the statistical standards used throughout the federal government to collect and publish data on race and ethnicity was to enhance the accuracy of demographic information about the nation's population. This commentary focuses on the impact of these changes on health data among Hispanic/Latino populations. The implications are deemed important because Hispanics/Latinos will be the largest minority group in the United States by 2010.¹ To date, existing systems for gathering data on the health status of Americans are seriously flawed in their ability to provide accurate, complete, and timely data on the health of Hispanic/Latino Americans.^{2–4} As a result, Hispanics/Latinos remain largely ignored in the national scientific and public discourse on health.

Changes Relevant to Hispanics

The most directly relevant issue was whether to add “Hispanic” as an option to the race question on government forms. Research was conducted to test what effect separate Hispanic ethnicity and race questions, along with their sequencing, would have in comparison with a single question. Findings indicated that a separate Hispanic-origin question that preceded the race question yielded the lowest non-response rate for the Hispanic-origin question and the lowest rate of reporting “other race” by Hispanics in the race question.^{5–7} On the basis of these findings, the new standards stipulate that the Hispanic-origin question should be asked separately, before the race question, if self-identification is used.⁸ The new standards also state that when data on race and ethnicity are collected separately, provision shall be made to report the number of respondents in each racial category who are Hispanic or Latino.

However, a combined Hispanic-origin and race format may be used for observer identification data on race and ethnicity. Under this option, multiple responses are also allowed and, in such cases, data is to be provided for the total number of respondents reporting “Hispanic or Latino and one or more races.” This will continue to present methodological challenges, since observer identification of ethnicity and race is known to be problematic and

to underestimate the number of people of Hispanic origin, which in turn has been documented to underestimate mortality and morbidity among Hispanics.^{2,9–11}

A second recommendation was that the term “Hispanic” should be retained but the term “Latino” should also be used because of its broader acceptance among this population.^{12–14}

The use of separate Hispanic-origin and race items, in which the Hispanic-origin item precedes the race item, promises to improve some of the problems posed by past nonresponse to the Hispanic ethnicity question and identification with “other race” categories among Hispanics. However, the large number of important data sets that rely on observer-reported Hispanic origin and race will continue to be problematic and will not be improved by the changes.

Another important change, the most controversial, is the new option of multiple responses to the race question. For the most part, discussions of this change have not considered the impact of the new multiple race response option for reporting data on Hispanic populations. However, the Racial and Ethnic Targeted Test (RAETT) found that a larger proportion of Hispanics (2%–19%) reported more than 1 race than did other groups (Blacks, <3%; American Indians, 2%–7%; Asian/Pacific Islanders, 4%–12%; Whites, 2%).⁶ Further, there is great variation in racial self-identification across Hispanic groups.¹⁵ Although estimates of the overall US population that identifies with multiple races are rather small (about 2%), it is difficult to argue that Hispanics as a group are not largely a multiracial population, regardless of what people are willing to report on a government form. Hispanic populations are extremely heterogeneous with respect to what we consider race in the United States. A cursory understanding of Latin American history demon-

Hortensia Amaro is with the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, Mass. Ruth E. Zambrana is with the Department of Women's Studies, University of Maryland, College Park.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Hortensia Amaro, PhD, Boston University School of Public Health, 715 Albany St, T2W, Boston, MA 02118 (e-mail: hamaro@bu.edu).

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strates that peoples of all races intermarried, including those of African, European, and Asian origins and populations native to the land. Hispanics are a population composed of multiracial people. Whether they identify with the terms used in US government forms and choose to use multiple race categories is related to their affinity (or lack thereof) to the US-based construction of race reflected in these forms, their social position in the United States as determined by their historic mode of incorporation, their socioeconomic status, and their generational level.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

We can expect that over time, given the option to report more than 1 race (as in the case of self-identification) or under the observer-reporting format, race data for Hispanics may yield an increased proportion of multiple race responses. While the new multiple race response format could provide an opportunity to better understand the relationship between multiracial identification and the health of Hispanics, it also poses great practical challenges on how to best summarize and categorize such data.

The current dialogue has largely focused on how to handle the categorization and reporting of multiple race responses and generally has not considered the added complexity of reporting multiple race responses among Hispanics. For Hispanic populations, the central issue is how racial identification, if it involves more than 1 race, will be tabulated against Hispanic ethnicity. In the past, when we did not face the current challenges of multiple race responses, the racial identification of Hispanics was rarely considered. Unless there is a concerted effort to grapple with the question of how to clarify multiple race identification among Hispanics, we will continue to see lack of attention to racial identification among Hispanics. However, the distinct health profiles of Hispanic subgroups,^{2,19-21} which also overlap with race self-identification, suggest that race is an important marker of health status as well as of other factors (e.g., student school retention, socioeconomic status).²²⁻²⁴ Non-White race is generally associated with a less favorable health profile among historically underserved Hispanics such as Puerto Ricans.

Measurement of a Dynamic Process

Multiracial identification, like race and ethnic identification, is a dynamic process that reflects societal trends and political identification as well as stigmatization. As the issue of whether or not to check multiple race categories begins to be discussed within Hispanic/Latino communities, we can expect to see changes in the current proportion of Hispanics who report

multiple race categories. However, we know relatively little about the factors that affect conditions under which Hispanics identify with various racial groups. Some studies suggest that loss of Spanish language ability, assimilation, low community and school density of Hispanic population, and higher socioeconomic status are associated with inconsistent Hispanic identification across time.^{16-18,25,26} Racial identification among Latinos in the United States is also likely to be influenced by the ongoing discourse on changes in racial constructions in Central and South America and the Caribbean. This discourse increasingly favors multiracial categories and a heightened sense of ethnic identity among Latinos outside the United States—as evidenced in the terms *criollo*, *mestizo*, *mulato*, *LatiNegra*, *Afro-Latino*, and *indigena*.²⁷⁻³⁶

Racial identification among Hispanics in the United States is also likely to be dependent on changes in racial hierarchies and the construction of race within the United States,³⁷⁻³⁹ the characteristics of immigrant Hispanic populations (particularly age at entry into the United States), socioeconomic status in the country of origin, and the ability to “pass” or be accepted as White within the US racial context.^{40,41} Finally, racial identification among Hispanics seems to be influenced by the process of cultural adaptation and life experience in the United States.⁴²⁻⁴⁶ An experiment to test the effects of the ordering of ethnicity and race questions on Hispanics’ reporting of “other race” found that the percentage of Hispanics reporting “other race” decreased only for Hispanics born in the United States, not for Hispanic immigrants.⁴⁷ The authors of the report argued that Hispanics’ reporting of “other race” is not an error but a real perception of respondents who do not see themselves as “White” or “Black.”⁴⁷ These findings suggest that cultural adaptation, notions of space, and changes in the perception of oneself within the United States are a dynamic process for Hispanics.

Hispanics’ comfort in identifying with race categories in the census and other forms will be affected over time by attempts to “socialize” people into either using or not using such categories. Already, there are efforts to get people to check and efforts to get people not to check multiple race categories. These organized efforts might bring about a change in how people identify themselves in the census and on other forms. Thus, the use of multiple categories for race will be subject to social and political influences, as were previous categories. However, what Hispanic groups will choose to do with this new option will be influenced in part by how they feel the data affect representation of their group. Hispanics, as well as other groups, may come to perceive that checking multiple race categories renders their “count” invisible. This will most likely

happen if they believe that their response will be grouped with others or used in ways that place their group at further disadvantage. If this occurs, these communities may develop organized voices against the use of multiple categories for race.

Other Continuing Issues

For Hispanics, there are larger issues related to the collection and reporting of health data.^{2-4,48,49} However, the major issues that have an impact on health data include (1) the undercount and misclassification of Hispanics in the census; (2) the lack of accurate intercensal data on Hispanics; (3) problems in the classification of Hispanic ethnicity when reports rely on observer or record data (such as death certificates, which have posed significant problems in the accurate assessment of mortality data among Hispanics); (4) lack of reporting by Hispanic subgroups, which results in a misleading picture of the mortality, health status, and health problems of Hispanics; (5) past lack of Spanish language instruments in some health surveys, which has undermined the development of baseline data against which to measure progress in health status; (6) lack of ethnic identifiers at the state level (90% of Hispanics are concentrated in just 10 states), thus obfuscating the importance of targeted health solutions to ethnic-specific health issues; and (7) lack of reported data on Hispanic health at the national or state level over the last 2 decades despite the historic presence of Hispanics in the United States. These problems have resulted in such a lack of data on the health of Hispanic populations and on targeted interventions that major tools for public health planning such as the Healthy People report often cannot even develop goals for specific diseases for the Hispanic populations.

Some of these problems bring to light additional issues in reporting race when reports come from observers or records. Similarly, the invisibility that has occurred with Hispanics because of their misclassification in such records is likely to create serious problems in the use of multiple race responses from observer- or record-derived data. Because the source of information is likely to differ and the reporting format will also differ, there may be additional new discrepancies in Hispanic birth and death records with regard to ethnicity and race. Thus, we are likely to witness a very interesting phenomenon: people who are born with a multiracial identification but who on death records are identified by a single race, or vice versa. We need better information on how persons responsible for reporting data based on observer records (e.g., death certificates) make judgments about race and ethnic-

ity and how this will affect their use of the multiple race responses option.

Needed Research

We need research that will help us to better understand how the interplay of social (e.g., receptivity by US society) and economic conditions and individual processes (e.g., immigration, cultural adaptation, and the role of community and family context)⁵⁰ affect how people identify themselves racially and ethnically, both publicly and privately. Whether people view the reporting of race and ethnicity in various contexts (e.g., census forms vs health-related surveys) similarly or differently, and how self-reporting of race and ethnicity interacts with socioeconomic status, are empirical questions that should be investigated. If the US public, especially racial and ethnic minorities, view the political implications of reporting in the census as being different from those of reporting in health surveys, they might report their race differently in those 2 contexts.

The multiracial identity of future Latino populations in the United States will also depend on patterns of intergroup marriage and childbearing. The identity of future generations of Latinos will be in part a function of geographic clustering and social and economic upward mobility, both of which are highly associated with available pools of potential Hispanic partners and partners of other races. Research is needed to help us understand the conditions and factors that affect the marriage and childbearing of Hispanics within and outside of their own groups.

Summary

We know very little about how the new option to report multiple races will be received and how it will affect reporting trends for Hispanics. This lack of knowledge is fueled by several factors: the lack of research on the process of ethnic and racial identification, prior aggregation of all Hispanics/Latinos into a single category, the lack of acknowledgment of differences by socioeconomic status and race of new waves of Hispanic immigrants, and the multiple factors that affect reporting in various contexts for various Hispanic populations. In the meantime, we will be faced with the question of how to handle such data for analyses of trends over time in a credible manner so that public health priorities can be determined and attended to.

The larger issue related to health data for Hispanics is the lack of adequate estimates of mortality and health conditions among Hispanic subgroups. When queried about this issue,

agency representatives repeatedly recognize the importance of such data but refer to the need for additional funding from Congress. It is unlikely that such agencies will see significant budget increases in the near future. Although important progress has been made in collecting health data on Hispanics in national surveys, federal and state agencies will need to concentrate on the use of existing funds and revisit methodologies that would enable these public institutions to provide data on Hispanic and other minority populations more adequately and fairly. As Hispanics become the largest minority group in the United States, it will become increasingly difficult for administrators to argue that resources should not be redistributed in a manner that responds to the needs of this growing taxpaying constituency. □

Contributors

Both authors participated fully in the conception, writing, and editing of the paper.

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